



New Internationalist
The people, the ideas, the action in the fight for global justice

Equality in history

New Internationalist Ready Lesson
Pre-Intermediate

This lesson:

- Speaking
- Time phrases and history vocabulary
- Reading
- Grammar: past simple
- Speaking – our countries and equality



Roman remains



Early unions



1850

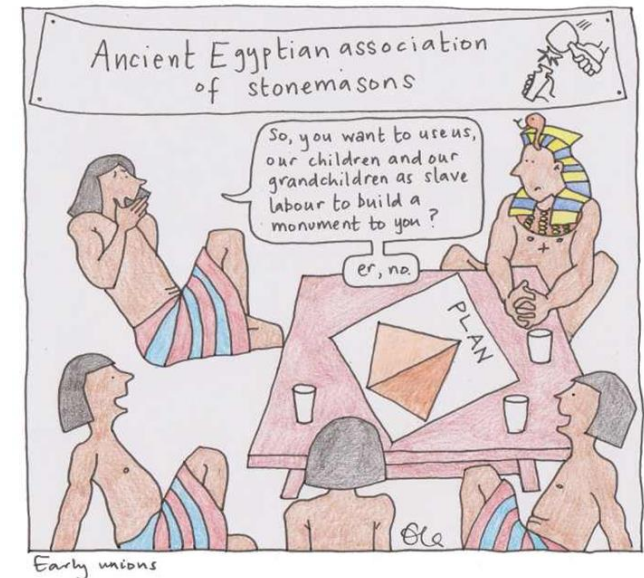
What do you know about world history? Discuss in groups

Speaking:

When do you think (in history) the world has been most equal?

Put these historical times in order of date and discuss how equal you think the societies were:

- a) Ancient Egyptian times
- b) The Roman Empire
- c) Victorian Britain
- d) Hunter-gatherers in North America
- e) China 2000 years ago



Historical time and years – match:

- a) In the year 1870
- b) In 1464
- c) In the Middle Ages
- d) Industrialisation
- e) Ancient Egyptian civilisation
- f) Indus valley civilisations
- g) In Roman times

- 1/ about 550 years ago
- 2/ between 45 BCE and 500 AD
- 3/ from 1760 - 1840
- 4/ from 5000 to 1500 BCE
- 5/ in the second half of the nineteenth century
- 6/ from 3100 to 30 BCE
- 7/ between the years 500 and 1500 AD

Reading: now read to find out how equal people were in history:

There are 5 short readings – you can all read all 5, or, in groups of 5, read one each and tell each other what you discover.



1/ How equal were hunter-gatherer societies? And why?

Weapons: a positive view

We now know that people who lived in hunter-gatherer societies needed equality and had to work together as groups to survive. The group sometimes threw out selfish people – they would find it difficult to survive if they did not find another group to join.

Most people now are afraid that other people will think they are selfish, and they are afraid that others will reject them. Because humans had to make tools, they had to develop an equal society. One group of tools were important here: weapons. If they didn't have weapons, the largest and fittest people were in control. When they had weapons, even small people can kill.

2/ How equal were the Egyptians and the Indus Valley civilisations? How do we know?

Pyramids and other buildings with no purpose

Societies that are equal do not usually build buildings with no purpose. In the past, when people lived well, they did not leave so much behind – usually only bones and a few things they needed. A society that is sustainable does not leave much. For example, the Indus Valley civilization of the second and third centuries BCE: it was sustainable and did not leave any palaces. Why would people in an equal spend their life building very big monuments? Groups build monuments when they have workers they do not need for survival, and to show how important they are. If they feel important, they have a reason to control other groups.

Free people would not choose to build a pyramid. You have to make them slaves (physically, economically or emotionally) to make them build very big monuments that have no clear purpose.

3/ How equal were societies in the Roman Empire and in China? What is the proof?

What did the Romans do for us?

Most people think the Roman Empire had a good effect on civilization. But people have found bones that show that people in Roman colonies were shorter and not so healthy. This shows they suffered from disease and starvation. Also, they did not produce so much pottery in the parts of Europe with biggest Roman colonies – this shows they were not so creative.

They did not have so many new ideas in Europe and around the Mediterranean when the Roman Empire was in control. They brought new ideas from outside and did not create them. China was more equal and produced more variety of ideas: the wheelbarrow, printing, gunpowder, new religious beliefs (the East Asian or Taoic religions) and innovations in philosophy and ecology.

4/ How equal were people in industrialisation? Why?

Industry brings development

In all human history, inequalities in society increased most in the 19th century – this was most clear in the parts of the world that were becoming industrial and most clearly in those parts of the world that were industrializing. Before industrialization, fashions changed slowly and people did not buy and use so much. Things could not grow so much and people could not keep so many things because they used the power of wind, water and, indirectly, the sun.

It was we started burning coal that we started to make more things. We used steam to drive machines and the machines could quickly change one thing into another: wool into jackets, iron into nails. But the machines could not run themselves; they needed people to look after them. Now there was no limit to what a small group of people could have if they made slaves work for them. If they put those people at machines eg. looms, they could produce so much more.

5/ How equal were people in Victorian Britain during the British Empire? And how equal is capitalism? How do we know?

Early capitalism and people getting shorter

In Victorian Britain there was a lot of inequality. Life expectancy in the worst parts of Manchester and Glasgow went down to 25 for many decades in the early 19th century. This was the centre of the British Empire. In the 1850s in England, the average height of people was the lowest that century. By 1918, average heights returned to the same as they had been a hundred years before in 1818.

People say that capitalism was a great economic success. But until 1917 it was only a success for people who had a lot of capital. After 1917, the inequality in money started to reduce across the world. And from then on, through to the 1970s, the money that came from the coal-burning factories started to spread to others.

Grammar: past simple

In pairs, using the past simple (you can use these verbs: *to create, to produce, to throw out, to need, to leave behind, to suffer, to bring, to increase, to change, to buy, to use, to keep*), summarise the different times in history and how equal the people were:

- 1/ hunter-gatherer societies
- 2/ the ancient Egyptians
- 3/ the Indus Valley civilisations
- 4/ the Roman Empire
- 5/ China, 2,000 years ago
- 6/ Victorian Britain



Now find the mistakes with verbs and correct them :

- 1/ In China about 2,000 years ago, people was in general more creative than people in the Roman Empire.
- 2/ The hunter-gathers couldn't kept too much food so they used to sharing the extra food they had at big parties.
- 3/ When industrialisation came, people started make a lot more things a lot more quickly and producing more fashions and material goods.
- 4/ The Ancient Egyptians were one of the most unequal societies and we can see this from the way they made slaves to build the pyramids.
- 5/ Some of the very old societies that we don't know much about was far more sustainable and far more equal eg. the Indus Valley civilisations which had not left any lasting monuments.

What about your country and other countries you know?

- 1) How equal are these countries now?
- 2) Was your country (and other countries you know) more equal in the past?
- 3) How do you know?
- 4) Is it a good idea to be more equal or less equal?
- 5) Why?



Homework / follow-up:

Read more about inequality, in Easier English:

https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php/Issue_504

Then click on the original at the bottom of each article and read the original – it won't be so difficult now!

